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Schoolscapes
The Newsletter

Professional Development

Training Session for Resource Persons

By Jean-Yves Daigle

Yesterday, in Saint-Hyacinthe, Margaret Rioux-Dolan, head of the Direction de la formation générale des jeunes, opened the second training session for resource persons involved in implementing the *Québec Education Program* at the elementary level. The audience of more than 600 people was comprised mainly of education consultants, school principals and teachers.

Rioux-Dolan stressed that it was important for the same group of resource persons to attend all the training sessions in order to create a community of learners, to facilitate the integration process and to gain a deeper understanding of the *Québec Education Program*. To illustrate her point, Rioux-Dolan noted that the first training session dealt with the development of competencies, and regulation and differentiation; the second session will look at how competencies are to be developed within a given cycle, how the cultural dimension is addressed in the *Québec Education Program*, how the different components of the program are interconnected, and how students progress within a given cycle; and the third and last session will focus on the transition from one cycle to the next. For Rioux-Dolan, faithful attendance at the training sessions is a key factor in the successful implementation of the *Québec Education Program*.

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Integrating the Cultural Dimension

By Eve Krakow

One of the aims of the *Québec Education Program* is to ensure that the programs of study include a cultural dimension. But what does this mean exactly? How can it be achieved in the classroom? In response to these queries, one of the workshops of the March 12-13 training session for resource persons dealt with the integration of the cultural dimension in teaching and learning.

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Training Session for Resource Persons

Resource Committee

The Ministère de l'Éducation has created a resource committee under the wing of the Direction de la formation générale des jeunes to provide schools and school boards with the most appropriate resources for implementing the *Québec Education Program*.

The 60 members of the resource committee work in schools or school boards. Rioux-Dolan explained that the Committee was meant to serve as a forum or network for cooperation, information-sharing and professional development. Based on needs identified by the education community, the committee has developed documents and training activities on the cycle-based system, the new learning paradigm, planning, and communicating with parents.

According to Rioux-Dolan, the work of the Committee complements that being carried out in schools and school boards, broadens our horizons and will help promote greater cohesion in the implementation of the *Québec Education Program*. She announced that the resources developed by the committee will be available on the Internet as of Fall 2001.

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"This approach is meant to highlight the cultural aspects already present in the QEP, that is, the scientific, literary, artistic and philosophical forms of culture," explained Hélène Béchard, one of the educators who designed the workshop. "Cultural enrichment is not an addition to the QEP, but a way of applying and living it. It can also be a way of making links between the different subjects."

The first obvious question is, what is culture? "We were very careful not to define it," Béchard admitted, "because culture can have all kinds of meanings; it can be all-inclusive or restrictive. However, in education, we can talk about immediate culture, which is each student's familiar environment, and general culture, which allows students to go beyond what they know and to make links between what they know and what they don't know, so as to broaden their cultural horizons."

One way teachers can integrate aspects of culture into their classrooms is by using "cultural referents." Cultural referents are focuses of study that are associated with culture and have a specific cultural significance. They may be events, media products, aspects of everyday life, elements of our heritage, artistic works, scientific discoveries, ways of thinking, values that influence behaviour, etc. These elements serve as vehicles for the examination of social phenomena or significant social trends.

Virtually anything, put in a context or studied in relation to other phenomena, can serve as a cultural referent. What is important, Béchard explained, is its pedagogical scope. "The teacher must have a clear pedagogical intent." This intent should correspond to the students' level and interests. A checklist describing the criteria for meaningful cultural referents—their characteristics, pedagogical scope and contribution to students' overall education—was provided to workshop participants as a working guide. "The idea is not to study the referent in and of itself, but to use it to develop subject-specific or cross-curricular competencies. Nor is the referent merely a way of introducing an activity—it should be exploited to its fullest potential."

The importance of integrating the cultural dimension

Culture provides both roots and wings, says Béchard. "Culture is about knowing where we come from so that we know where we're going. We have to understand why things are done in a certain way before we can realize that there are other ways of doing things, which in turn opens the door to diversity."

The integration of culture is directly related to the conception of learning in the QEP, she noted. "We want students to become responsible citizens, to

exercise critical judgment, to be open to the world. The cultural dimension is therefore essential." It is also a means of making links to meaningful situations in the students' lives. Finally, it takes on increasing importance in a world where people no longer hold just one job in their lifetime and are called on to continually learn and adapt to new situations.

The mission of schools is to provide socialization, noted Abigail Anderson, who led the English-language workshop with Janet Radman. "How can we learn to belong to a community if the culture of that community is never made explicit?"

Workshop participants began by thinking about what culture is to them. Anderson stressed the importance of this exercise. "Culture is an ideological stance on how we make meaning of our experiences," she said. "Often, we tend to confine our definition of culture to what we consider 'high culture' and to suppress or marginalize other cultures." She held up a few examples: a Marge Simpson doll, a medicinal wheel.

It is also important to realize that there is already a cultural dimension in what we teach. Teachers come into the classroom with their own background, beliefs and values. Teaching materials reflect a cultural standpoint. "There is no such thing as neutral culture. No matter what, it is ideologically positioned."

Classroom activities

Workshop participants were asked to bring in an object that could serve as a cultural referent. One Val-d'Or educator brought in a piece of gold and explained how this object, meaningful to the children in her community, could be used to explore the importance and role of gold in the world. An embroidered handkerchief was a link not only to a traditional art but also to the time when women stayed at home and practised such crafts. A box of plastic lunch-bags was presented as a lens for studying the changes that have occurred in society (kids no longer going home for lunch because of changes in family organization), consumer habits and environmental concerns. One teacher talked about how he uses news items in his classroom to discuss events and life in other parts of the world.

Integrating the cultural dimension requires that teachers take on the role of the anthropologist, said Anderson. "You have to ask, What does this look like that I've seen before? What else (past or other cultures) is related to this? What is missing?" One might look at the cultural context of heroes and heroines in television programs for children, or why learning to work in a team is important in North America today, she said.

The final part of the workshop focused more specifically on how to weave the cultural dimension in with the QEP. "There are cultural aspects to all the topics, themes, disciplines, competencies and areas of lifelong learning," said Anderson. "How is the scientific method of hypothesis, observation, taking notes and arriving at a conclusion part of the 'culture' of the scientist? Why are some works of art considered better than others? How do religious beliefs colour our behaviour? Why is the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood evil and dangerous—where did that notion come from? How have technologies changed our concept of time? These are just some basic starting points."

The Interdependence of the Components of the Québec Education Program

By Wendy Mill

According to Abigail Anderson, it is hard for teachers to connect their classroom teaching with the *Québec Education Program*. Anderson, one of the leaders of the English-language workshop on the interdependence of the components of the *Québec Education Program*, says it doesn't matter whether teachers start from an area of lifelong learning, a cross-curricular competency or a subject-specific competency; any approach can work, as long as there is focus and continuity.

How can teachers make connections between a given cross-curricular competency and an area of lifelong learning in a way that uses subject content and develops the cross-curricular competency? Who decides what competencies it is most important for any given group to develop?

Pascale Porlier, leader of the French-language workshop on the same theme, underlines the importance of planning which cross-curricular competencies to develop in the course of a cycle, and points out that this is the responsibility of the cycle team. Anderson agrees that planning is crucial. She says focus is not something elementary teachers talk about. It's not in their culture to do so; they even have trouble identifying the concept. And with no focus, there is no planning—just one project after another. Given that competencies have to be worked on over a two-year period, teachers need to focus on planned competencies.

Elaborating on the theme of the cycle team, Porlier observes that the specialists, homeroom teachers, administrators and non-teaching professionals who make up the cycle team may never have worked together before. Members of the English workshop point to a related difficulty: many teachers are not used to working with others, and not eager to do so. Eager or not, they have to learn to work well together. They must find out what they have in common, in order to choose cross-curricular competencies to develop over the two-year cycle, they must achieve a shared understanding of the competencies they select, and they must work together to decide how the areas of lifelong learning can be integrated into the learning process. Finally, not only must they relate the areas of lifelong learning and the cross-curricular competencies, they must relate both to the subject learnings, which contextualize them.

Although cycle teams only became a focus of discussion near the end of the English workshop, these participants also underscored the importance of building bridges between subject-specific competencies, cross-curricular competencies and areas of lifelong learning. Learning must be authentic.

Workshop members formed teams. Each team was assigned a particular cross-curricular competency and area of lifelong learning to combine. One team,

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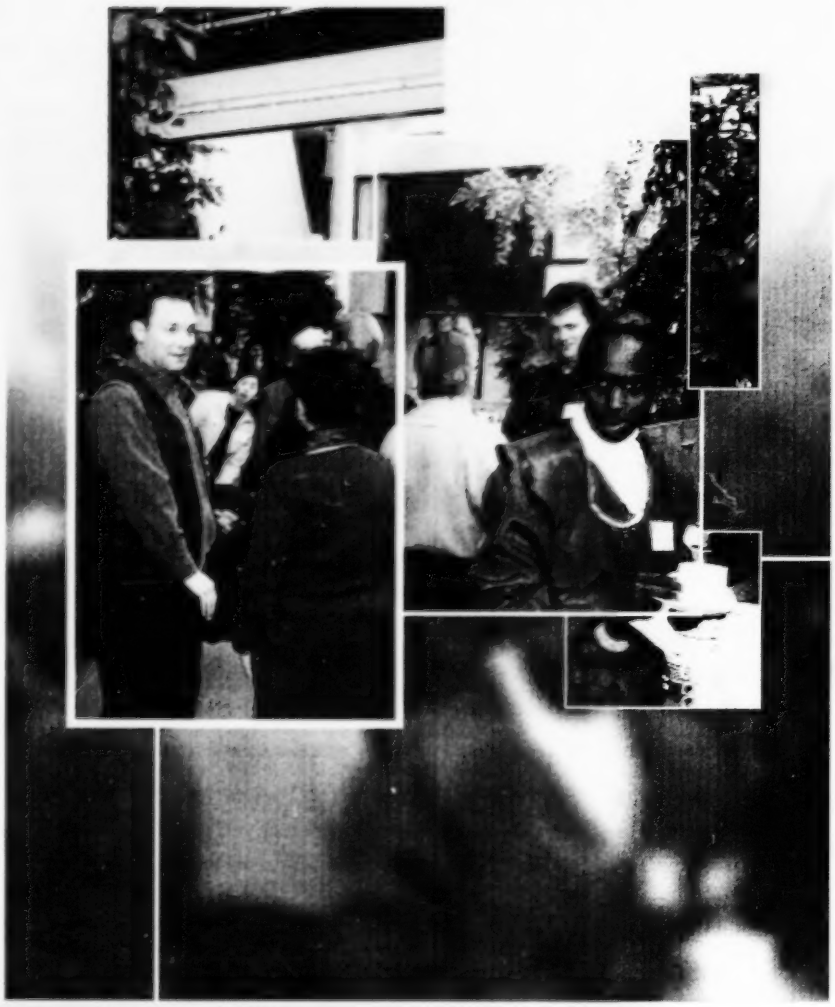
whose assignment involved the area of lifelong learning "Consumer rights and responsibilities" and the competency "To develop his/her personal identity," focussed on a recent news item about a boy who was refused medical coverage for a cochlear implant operation, while a girl received financial support for breast enlargement. Sure that this was an issue likely to interest young people, the team discussed what components of the QEP they could associate with it—the cost of the operation (mathematics), language arts and media literacy and so on, in addition to the featured area of lifelong learning and cross-curricular competency. As one workshop leader said approvingly, they grounded the cross-curricular competencies in the subjects.

Another group took the opposite path, working through the subject to the cross-curricular competencies and areas of lifelong learning. Their assignment concerned social relationships (area of lifelong learning) and "To exercise critical judgement" (cross-curricular competency). A Protestant Moral and Religious Education teacher proposed a competency from that subject: To appreciate the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Western culture. The group decided to look at spring traditions in different religions, to examine various artefacts and their descriptions and to produce a play on an Easter theme. This involved working together (social relationships), building (mathematics, social relationships), tolerance, French language skills (The project was to be carried out in French), and some history. The team stressed that the development of group skills needed to be helped by explicit teaching and observed that the whole activity would require an enormous amount of planning.

In a short wrap-up session, participants identified problems, strengths and needs. They need more training on how to work as a cycle team: "We're used to individual planning, and when we get together, we get off-task." They discussed possible sources of on-site staff training (McGill and the Partnership for School Improvement were mentioned). Finally, they came back to one of the leitmotifs of the workshop: "the T-word." All agreed that a major stumbling block with respect to cycle teams is time: time to learn and time to work together. They hope that this is a temporary problem.



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